Use a wide range of tools to reach the media

Get A Digital Life: An Internet Reality Check

By Jim Carroll

Several months ago, I spent some time with the public relations team of a major Canadian company. There were about 30 people in the group, individuals responsible for a wide range of PR related functions. I walked them through a whole bunch of nifty tools and methods that they could use in their day to day activities, and even more time exploring the unique ways that journalists are using the Web today. I was trying to get across to them, as I often do with every group that I deal with, that it is a different world out there, and they've got to think differently about how they do their job.

One of my key messages was that they had better recognize that the Internet has come to play a huge role in the day to day activities of the average journalist. One fact I picked up from *Public Relations Quarterly* was that 98% of journalists were on-line in 1998, compared with 63% in 1997. Not only that, I stressed, but the target audience of the PR professional was rapidly becoming not just the journalist, but the public at large. Direct contact was more critical than ever, given the massive reach of the Internet. (Any PR professional who has had an issue spiral out of control on the Internet realizes the enormity of that last statement.)

Given this reality, I wanted them to understand that they needed to know how to use a wide range of tools to build a useful relationship with this wired journalist and with the public. They had to think of countless new ways of reaching this vast and disparate audience — merely E-mailing out a press release to a bunch of people on a list would no longer suffice. Bottom line? They had better begin to develop a wide range of skills beyond merely "working the media." They had better think about using new technologies to reach their new, tech-savvy audience, whether they be journalists or beyond.

Since then, I've thought a lot about this issue, and I've come to realize that in many situations, the typical press release is truly a dead medium. The fact is, when a press release is sent by E-mail, it is pretty well ignored, unless there is some type of significant news story involved. (Since I write for a number of publications, my mailbox gets flooded with useless, boring press releases on a daily basis. I ignore much of it.) A fax-release is treated with even less respect. If you wander into any media outlet, you'll find a lonely old fax machine sitting over in the corner, pumping out page after page after page of the same old PR drivel. I've noticed that the news folks around it often barely give each and every press release barely a glance. That's why telephone contact has been so critical. You've got a major story, you pick up the phone, and call your key contacts. That will always be the key to PR success.

But in this new world, that won't suffice. You've got to reach a wider range of journalists, many of who are bored with PR fluff. And direct access to the public-at-large is more important than ever before, particularly if you are in the midst of a raging battle for public opinion. Is there a way out? I think so — I believe that maybe it is time that PR professionals begin to think about doing something more in terms of the message, particularly with multimedia.

With the growing acceptance of audio and video on the Web, it is increasingly likely that an ever more tech-savvy journalist and citizen will be more amenable to a different type of message.

Why not issue a video-release? An audio statement? A ShockWave or Flash file with accompanying background info? Today, it isn't terribly complicated to get audio and video onto the Web, once you have a useful infrastructure established.

Heck, for my own Web site, I've got scads of video and audio files from various TV appearances, speeches, my radio shows and other sources. I've equipped myself in my home office with all the gear, for less than $5,000, to be my own multimedia powerhouse. If I can do it, any PR flack can.

And that's what Fortune 500 PR professionals need to be thinking about. If there is a major announcement forthcoming from your CEO, be ready to place an audio and video version of the announcement online. Dress it up a bit for some dramatic effect. Make it look professional. Link it to related information files on your Web site that round out the story... and you might find that the journalists you need to reach are a little bit more interested in what you have done. Not only that, but you might find the public will relate to it as well.

Who knows if it will work or not — but one thing is clear. In an era in which the standard press release is dead, something new is needed, and fast.

Jim Carroll, FCA, is an author, columnist and frequent keynote speaker. His latest book, "Get a (Digital) Life: An Internet Reality Check," debunks the myths of the Internet, and paints an extraordinary view of the future. You can find his Web site at www.jimcarroll.com. Review copies of the book are available.

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